

## **The role of text linguistics in the foreign language class**

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### **Abstract**

Throughout the short history of text linguistics research, some studies have pointed out the relevance of the text as a basic unit to approach a foreign language. This article deals with some of the activities on text type characteristics put into practice with Spanish students with upper intermediate level of English language. Following the classical classifications on text typology (Werlich 1975, Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981, or Hatch, 1992, among others), this paper will provide an outline of the structure of a foreign language class based on text linguistics. The application of the outline will be shown in relation to two kinds of texts: diaries / journals and descriptive texts.

### **Resumen**

A lo largo de la breve historia de la investigación en torno a la lingüística textual, algunos estudios han señalado la relevancia del texto como unidad básica en la aproximación a una lengua extranjera. Este artículo expone algunas actividades en torno a rasgos que caracterizan los tipos de texto. Han sido puestas en práctica con alumnos españoles de un nivel intermedio-avanzado en lengua inglesa. Siguiendo algunas de las clasificaciones más clásicas referentes a la lingüística textual (Werlich 1975, Beaugrande y Dressler, 1981, o Hatch, 1992, entre otros), se presentará un esquema que resume la estructura de una clase de lengua extranjera basada en la lingüística textual. Finalmente, se presentará la aplicación del esquema con relación a dos tipos de textos: los diarios y los textos descriptivos.

### **Introduction**

Before the existence of text linguistics, a sentence grammar and not a text grammar was used to analyse the main features that characterise a text. It is not until the 70s that the first approaches to the text are produced. From that time onwards there is a gradual increase of studies on text linguistics. At the beginning of the 80s, Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) and other text linguists take into consideration the previous studies on text generation and structure analysis. They make reference to the

speakers' world knowledge in their procedural approach to text linguistics. This speakers' world knowledge will be the departure point in the session corresponding to a text linguistics class that is developed in section 1.1.

The two kinds of texts chosen to be examples of a text linguistics class cannot always be found in the existing classifications of texts. Because of the different criteria used in their creation, the number of text types included in each classification vary, and the existence of a different taxonomy depending on the expert creating it is a well known fact. At the same time, there is not a single classification that can be used to order and classify all types of texts. Regarding the criteria used in the different text typologies, most of the taxonomies take into consideration contextual factors and the purpose the speaker has in mind when producing a text.

Most linguists agree on the classification into five text-types: narrative, descriptive, argumentative, instructive, and comparison/contrast. Some classifications divide the types of texts according to their function. Others differ because they take into consideration the topic of the texts, the producer and the addressee, or the style. Overlaps of different text types are frequent, and in most cases the text cannot be identified as an example of just one text type. In relation to the overlapping, Adam and Petitjean, (1989) propose the analysis with text sequences. Virtanen (1992) establishes a double classification (discourse type and text type) to be used when the identification text-text type is not straightforward.

Different studies offer partial solutions to the present problems of the text typologies. The following three characteristics are only three of the most common in the classifications created up to now: lack of agreement on what criterion must be followed when classifying text types, unequal study of the different text types, and existence of texts that cannot be included in any of the classifications created up to now. Despite this situation, most of the text analysts decide upon one of the classical taxonomies when classifying a specific text.

### **1. Text-linguistic session**

The following outline summarises the steps to follow in a class based on text linguistics. Initially, the activities were planned for upper-intermediate students. However, most of them can be adapted to students of different levels of the target language (by eliminating some steps, reducing the difficulty, shortening the writing pieces, etc.).

Previous to the session, the teacher chooses a text for that class which will not be given to the students at the beginning of the session. They will get the text after reflecting on what they are going to read. For the first time it is advisable to bring a text as homogeneous as possible, i.e. with most of its sequences characterising a text type. Aspects such as difficulty of vocabulary, structure (paragraphs, stanzas, etc....), and length must be taken into consideration in all cases.

#### **Step 1.- Eliciting characteristics of text type**

The students indicate the main characteristics of the text type regarding function, addressee and structure. Depending on their level of the target language, they can also add the most remarkable features in relation to the vocabulary and the syntax expected. All these characteristics are explained, completed and complemented by the teacher. In relation to the identification of texts, Benoit and Fayol (1989) point out that eleven-year-old children are able to distinguish narrative, descriptive, and argumentative texts.

#### **Step 2.- Providing examples.**

Students point out examples of the text type that is analysed within that class. This part of the session is based on their previous personal experiences as readers. They cite the sources that contain the text type object of study, and the teacher collects those contributions and suggests additional examples.

#### **Step 3.- Discussing possible channels.**

Discussion of the channel where a text of that type might appear (novels, newspapers, magazines, etc.); when applicable any connection with some films may be mentioned, for example, plots of the films based on novels, where the text type is present though maybe slightly transformed because of the different channel used to present it.

#### **Step 4.- Practice.**

The students are presented with a text of a specific text type in order to analyse the above-mentioned characteristics. This part of the session starts with reading the text provided by the teacher. The text characterises a text type. The specific features of the text type are identified (verb tenses for a narrative text, use of adjectives for descriptions, analysis of connectors for argumentative, succession of events for instructive, etc.).

## **Step 5.- Research.**

A paper on the text type analysed that day is required: the students try to find an example of the text type analysed in class and write a paper describing the main characteristics that were mentioned that day. As an additional or alternative activity they might produce a sample of the type of text where those features are present.

### **1.1. Descriptive texts**

In order to analyse the main characteristics of a descriptive text, we start with a contrastive analysis of a descriptive text and a narrative text. This is advisable since examples of narrations and descriptions are frequently found in the same piece of writing. Because of their experience as readers, students are familiar with this simultaneity.

#### **Step 1.- Eliciting characteristics of the text type**

This step consists of identifying the function of a descriptive text, and an analysis of a descriptive structure through comparison with a narrative text. Afterwards, the different kinds of description are identified (topography, portrait, etc.). The most frequent topics of descriptions are mentioned, and also the difference between objective and subjective descriptions, and the main characteristics of the vocabulary they expect to find. Special attention should be paid to the role of adjectives within the descriptive texts.

#### **Step 2.- Providing examples**

The students contribute with examples of descriptions they have read, both within a novel or as independent texts.

Suggested questions for this section:

- Mention descriptions you have read: 'Who / What was described?', 'Was it a subjective / objective description?', 'Why?', 'What do you think are the adjectives that most successfully qualify the topic described?'.
- 'What are the adjectives you would use to describe a sport you like / your best friend / a country you would like to visit?' 'Do you think these descriptions should be objective or subjective?', 'Why?'.

### Step 3.- Discussing possible channels

Apart from the above-mentioned inclusion of descriptions within novels, readers can find examples of descriptions through different kinds of channels such as travel guides or brochures. These and other examples (textbooks, reference books, etc.) are provided by the students and complemented by the instructor.

### Step 4.- Practice

In order to put into practice the ability to identify descriptive texts, different kinds of activities can be done in the class. These can be altered, depending on the students' age and their level of the target language.

Suggested activities:

- On comparison: focusing on length and complexity, compare sentences from a narrative text and sentences from a descriptive text. Also compare paragraphing and layout. The purpose is to identify the syntactic characteristics of a descriptive text.
- On the topic of description: identifying the topic of description and the purpose of the text.
- On vocabulary: highlighting of the adjectives used in the text, classification of those adjectives (size, colour, shape, etc.), analysis of difficult words, study of static verbs.

### Example:

This extract from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, (2001:20) was one of the texts analysed in order to identify the main characteristics of a descriptive text.

Perhaps it had something to do with living in a dark cupboard, but Harry had always been small and skinny for his age. He looked even smaller and skinnier than he really was because all he had to wear were old clothes of Dudley's and Dudley was about four times bigger than he was. Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair and bright-green eyes. He wore round glasses held together with a lot of Sellotape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose. The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar in his forehead which was shaped like a bolt of lightning. He had had it as long as he could remember and the first question he could ever remember asking his Aunt Petunia was how he had got it.

Once the students have gone through the steps 1, 2 and 3, they are ready to identify the main characteristics of this descriptive text. The identification can be carried out throughout individual work or group work. Before identifying the main characteristics of the text, they provide some information on the novel and/or the film,

the author and their main characters.

Afterwards, they identify the topic of description (portrait of Harry Potter), the purpose of the text (inform about the physical characteristics of the main character) and the potential addressees (children and teenagers). This step might lead to long discussions if the text is as well known as this one. Issues such as the addressee and the function of the text might elicit open answers and not only one of them is the correct one. It is advisable to limit the time dedicated to discussion in order to avoid running out of time for the analysis of the linguistic features of the text.

The students recognise the characteristics of a physical description underlining adjectives, analysing the use of comparatives and the presence of copulative sentences. They also identify if the description is objective or subjective. In relation to vocabulary, since they have been given the context of the new words, they can derive the new word meanings from it (see Fukkink, Blok and Glopper, 2001). Finally, they analyse the role of the supporting characters in relation to the main one in order to find out to what extent their characteristics enhance Harry's.

**Step 5.- Research.** Students try to find examples of descriptions, either according to the characteristics mentioned in class or they are given a topic and find specific descriptions according to it. As an alternative, or as an additional activity, when they are given the topic, the students produce a description where they use the main devices present in a descriptive text analysed in class.

## **1.2. Diaries / Journals**

The use of diaries / journals in the foreign language class is recommended because it stimulates imagination, creativity, and observation of everything that surrounds the students. Writing a diary entry is an opportunity to let English flow and improves the writing skills without the worry of writing without errors. Usually, only the self is in mind as an audience, though it is not uncommon using the dialogue journal as way to communicate with the instructor who becomes audience and reads and responds to what the student has written (Brown, 1994:328, Grabbe and Kaplan, 1996:333).

### **Step 1.- Eliciting characteristics of the text type**

- Analysis of the concept of privacy and the role of the addressee of this kind of text. Discussion of the habit of journal keeping. The students provide personal experiences as journal writers and explain briefly the role of the audience (if any)

they write to. Questions for the class use: 'Have you ever written a journal?', 'For how long?', 'Would you like anybody to read it?', 'Do you still keep it?', etc.

- Writing to get feelings 'off the chest'. Its influence on vocabulary. Register. Writing without tension implies loosening up, and this has an influence in the language. Questions raised: 'Would you use the same expressions / vocabulary when writing in your journal as you do when writing an essay for the class?', 'Why? / Why not?', 'Can you provide examples?' 'Is there a code language in any journal?'
- Punctuation. Questions raised: 'What are the most frequent punctuation devices in the entry of a journal?', 'Are they important?', 'Why do you think they are present in the text?'

**Step 2.-** Providing examples. The students mention journals / journal entries they have read. They analyse what was told, and analyse the role of personal circumstances in their examples. Relevant 'journal writers' that the students might be familiar with should be mentioned: Adrian Mole or Anna Frank, among others.

**Step 3.-** Discussing possible channels. Even if the journal entries are created to be written in a notebook and in most cases not to be read by an addressee, the students might be familiar with some films whose plot was based on a famous diary. This is the case of Anna Frank and Bridget Jones, whose stories have been adapted for the cinema.

**Step 4.-** Practice. The students are provided with an entry of a diary / journal and analyse the function and structure of the text. They also analyse the different syntactic devices mentioned in step 1 and the role played by the different punctuation devices.

**Example:** This is a diary entry from Sue Townsed's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole aged 13 ¾* (1995:20).

Monday January 19<sup>th</sup>

I have joined a group at school called the Good Samaritans. We go out into the community helping and stuff like that. We miss Maths on Monday afternoons.

Today we had a talk on the sort of things we will be doing. I have been put in the old age pensioners' group. Nigel has got a dead yukky job looking after kids in a playgroup. He is as sick as a parrot.

I can't wait for next Monday. I will get a cassette so I can tape all the old fogies' stories about the war and stuff. I hope I get one with a good memory.

The dog is back at the vet's. It has got concrete stuck on its paws. No wonder it was making such a row on the stairs last night. Pandora smiled at me in school dinner today,

but I was choking on a piece of gristle so I couldn't smile back. Just my luck!

After going through steps 1, 2, and 3, the students are able to identify the main features of a diary entry through individual or group work. They discuss the function of the text (tell the most relevant events which happened that day) and addressee (the writer or potential readers of the diary). Afterwards they should be able to identify the characteristics analysed in the first steps of the lesson. Regarding this extract, the students should identify the following: most events are described in first person (main character writing about what happened to him that day); when the third person is used the main purpose is telling what happened to characters that are very close to the writer and they are relevant to the main character's development.

The style is informal, as it can be appreciated in the vocabulary, with the use of idioms: "as sick as a parrot" and colloquial expressions: "stuff like that", "sort of things", "dead yukky job", "old fogies' stories" "war and stuff", and "no wonder"; Depending on the students' level and their ability to derive meanings from the context, these expressions might require an explanation / translation from the teacher. Finally, regarding the punctuation, the students should recognise the use of contractions and the exclamation mark used to finish the entry: "just my luck!".

### **Step 5.- Research**

Search of examples of diary entries and production of a diary entry based on a personal experience.

## **2. Conclusions**

A foreign language class based on the above-mentioned outline is a balanced class where the four skills (speaking, writing, reading and listening) are put into practice. A session based on the study of a specific type of text is mainly practical and the students continuously play an active role in the development of the class. The most remarkable advantages shown in the students' learning are the following three:

- Stimulates reading. After the discussion described in the second step of the sessions, an interest in other students' reading arises and recommendations about specific texts or novels are very frequent. The texts the students mention in the second step are usually the ones they remember because of a positive experience and this creates curiosity among the students who have not read that piece of writing. Their background knowledge on literature and on different kinds of publications also increases.



- Writing skills are improved. Since the students get familiar with a specific text structure in the sessions, and the same structure is required in their writing pieces, an improvement in the students' writing has been shown, and the use of specialised vocabulary is also gradually included.
- First steps in research are taken. For some students, a class on text linguistics provides them with an opportunity to take the first steps in research when they try to find a sample of the text type studied in class.

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